
BOOK REVIEW

IS FEMINISM DEAD OR IS IT FLUORIDE IN THE WATER?

***Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*, by Jo Reger. New York: Oxford University Press 2012, 256 pages, \$24.95 Paper. ISBN: 978-0199861989.**

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Throughout the history of the movement, feminism has regularly been declared dead, or at the very least, no longer necessary. Alongside talk about the demise and irrelevance of feminism, social commentators suggest that we are living in a “postfeminist” generation where fewer people, especially younger women, identify as feminist or are involved in feminist activism. At the same time that some people are writing obituaries for feminism, feminist ideas have permeated the cultural landscape. The extent of the diffusion of feminism into mainstream culture prompted feminist authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards to suggest that feminism has become “like fluoride . . . it’s simply in the water” (2000:17). These contrasting public discourses create a characterization of contemporary feminism as simultaneously “everywhere” and “nowhere.” Sociologist Jo Reger tackles this paradoxical situation in her book *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*.

In order to explain what accounts for “everywhere-nowhere” feminism, or the idea that feminism is “present and active, yet undetected” (2012:5), Reger examines community-level feminist activism. Although social movement scholars tend to focus on either the micro level of identity construction or the macro level of national and international politics, Reger argues that a community-level analysis can provide new insights into the contemporary feminist

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movement, as well as help illuminate larger social movement questions and concerns about movement continuity.

Reger's overarching argument is that the cultural and political environment of a community plays a major role in shaping contemporary feminism. She supports her argument by drawing on observational and interview data collected from three U.S. communities: Woodview, Evers, and Green City. Woodview is located in a Midwest county with a large regional university. Reger describes the area as conservative and unwelcoming of feminism. Evers is located in a politically liberal and progressive East Coast town. Participants characterize their community as the "Evers bubble," a phrase which communicates a feeling that feminism is everywhere around them. Finally, Green City is located in a large, Northwest metropolitan area with overlapping and vibrant feminist and queer activist circles. In these three communities, Reger interviewed 40 self-identified feminists, and observed local events (e.g. performances of the *Vagina Monologues*) and locations (e.g. feminist bookstores).

Chapters 1 and 2 compare feminist identity formation in each community. Reger finds that the significance of a feminist identity for participants depends on the degree of openness and acceptance of feminism within their political and cultural environments. Although the hostile and conservative environment in Woodview creates strong activists for whom feminism is an articulated and highly visible identity, identifying as feminist was simply assumed, and therefore, rarely articulated in the more liberal and progressive communities of Evers and Green City. Because feminism is taken for granted in these communities, it is often submerged in or linked to other forms of activism, making feminism both pervasive and invisible.

In the next chapter, Reger explores generational relations in contemporary feminist communities. Generational discord in the feminist movement has garnered a decent amount of public attention in recent years, with media representations comparing relations between second-wave generation and contemporary feminists to fighting between mothers and daughters. Reger questions the accuracy of this portrayal by examining participant beliefs about second-wave generation feminism. Contrary to media depictions, Woodview feminists express admiration for second-wave

generation feminists. Reger suggests that this professed appreciation stems from a desire among contemporary Woodview feminists for more allies who can help them accomplish their goals in a hostile environment. Meanwhile, Evers feminists often spoke of second-wave generation feminism negatively, as one participant disapprovingly remarked about another activist, “She’s *so* second wave.” Compared to the admiration expressed by Woodview feminists, participants in Evers are highly critical of the second-wave generation and construct strict boundaries between that group and themselves, claiming that what they practice “ain’t your mother’s feminism.” The stark difference in responses to second-wave feminism suggests that community factors play a major role in shaping generational relations, ranging from admiration to antagonism.

In Chapter 4, Reger addresses the criticism that contemporary feminism is exclusively focused on personal empowerment and cultural change. Like the media hype of feminist cat-fighting between second-wave generation and contemporary feminists, Reger finds that this characterization does not always reflect the reality of the movement. In fact, she notes that feminist activism in Woodview resembles prior feminist activism with participants engaging in efforts focused on education and awareness campaigns such as Take Back the Night or the Clothesline Project. Even so, feminist activism in Evers and Green City leans more toward cultural and embodied resistance, with participants engaging in a variety of strategies from drag king shows and crafting circles to radical cheerleading and rock camps for girls. Although feminist activism in these two communities tends to be heavily cultural, certain situations arise that push activists to engage with policymakers. Reger argues that contemporary feminist activists use a range of strategies to address a wide variety of issues, and they draw on some tactics more than others depending on what makes the most sense in their community. Furthermore, she suggests expanding definitions of resistance to include the more culturally-driven efforts of many contemporary feminists, thereby making feminism more visible.

In the next chapter, Reger examines a longstanding issue in feminist circles: creating a diverse and inclusive movement. Reger finds that most contemporary feminists struggle with confronting

racism and fostering diversity in the movement. All participants with whom Reger spoke agree that addressing inequalities within the movement is an important issue, but when it comes to having a language to discuss these issues, some communities are better equipped than others. Nonetheless, Reger finds that inclusivity tends to be “a concept in feminist discourse and not a practice” (2012:155). In other words, despite their desire for inclusivity, most participants lack ideas and directions on how to incorporate it, which suggests that diversity and inclusivity remain unresolved challenges in the feminist movement.

The final empirical chapter of the book touches on a growing trend in contemporary feminism: deconstructing sexed and gendered identities. Reger finds that the adoption and incorporation of identity fluidity happens more in liberal communities than conservative ones. Woodview feminists tend to identify in conventional ways (e.g. male or female, heterosexual or lesbian) and do not discuss transgender, whereas Evers and Green City feminists embrace identity fluidity and engage in ongoing discussions of transgender, especially in Green City, where there is a large and established network of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) people. Reger argues that the context shapes how participants construct queer and transgender issues, making it more or less common or controversial in certain communities.

Reger finds that many people still identify as feminist, possess a feminist consciousness, and engage in feminist activism, providing empirical evidence for counter claims that feminism is dead. Rather than dying, Reger demonstrates that feminism is simply evolving because the context for the movement is changing both nationally and locally. Depending on the political and cultural environment, a community may be more or less hostile toward or accepting of feminism and feminist activism. This community context then shapes how feminists self-identify, respond to previous generations, address (or struggle to address) inclusivity, and “do” feminism. In other words, people are being feminist and doing feminism in ways that work for them and their communities. Even though feminism might be considered dead and nowhere to be found on a national level, in these communities, Reger shows that the work of the movement continues, and feminism can be seen “in the water” everywhere.

Although impressively argued, Reger's analysis focuses on the experiences of feminists who are at least college-aged, thereby overlooking the perspectives of younger feminists. Incorporating voices of youth into a study of contemporary feminism in the United States is especially important as the market-driven version of "girl power" that emerged in the mid-1990s shows no sign of letting up nearly 20 years later. Although rooted in feminist ideas of empowerment, the dominant consumer versions of "girl power" often communicate antifeminist, postfeminist, and individualistic messages (Taft 2004). Some research has explored girls' reactions to this "girl power" discourse, but less attention has been given to how feminist-identified girls "do" feminism in the context of marketed "girl power." Speaking with younger feminists about these issues could further our understanding of contemporary feminism.

Minor critiques aside, *Everywhere and Nowhere* is a useful book for researchers, teachers, and students of sociology. For social movement scholars who study the feminist movement, future research could build on Reger's findings by looking beyond the United States and asking how different contexts shape feminist identities and activism at the community level. In addition to cross-cultural research, Reger's attention to community environment could be extended to studies of other movements. For example, how do community level dynamics play out in the LGBTQ rights movement, or the White Power movement? This book would also be a great addition to a social movement syllabus, particularly for units on social movement continuity and discussions on the consequences of the "mainstreaming" of social movements. Overall, *Everywhere and Nowhere* is appealing not just because of its well-argued analysis, but also because it speaks to and has uses for multiple audiences.

References

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